

Prisons Close Doors Throughout U.S.

By Audrey Arthur

ALBANY, N.Y. — The New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (NYS DCCS) will follow a national trend as it plans to shutter four state correctional facilities as a result of a decreased inmate population.

The minimum-security facility Monterey Shock Incarceration Correctional Facility along with medium-security facilities Butler Correctional Facility, Chateaugay Correctional Facility and Mount McGregor Correctional Facility, will undergo a year transitional period before their closures on July 26, 2014. The move

to close the facilities will save taxpayers an estimated \$30 million annually.

"In response to a reduced crime rate that has shrunk our inmate population, we are continuing to right size the state's costly prison system and saving taxpayers tens of millions of dollars annually. This reform plan was made with careful consideration and detailed analysis to ensure we are not impacting the safety of each facility's employees and the public," said Anthony Annucci, acting NYS DCCS commissioner, in a statement. "Over the next 12 months, we will have the beds available in the system to transfer those inmates from the four facilities and not impact the safety of staff, the inmate population, or the public. No inmates will be released early due to the closing of a facility, and we will not have to seek any temporary, double bunking variances from the State Commission of Correction."

The decline in the inmate population is attributed to an overall drop in crime rates. According to a report issued by the department, the state has witnessed a 15 percent drop in crime over the past 10 years. This includes a 13 percent decrease in violent crimes throughout the state.

The overall prison population of New York has declined by nearly 24 percent since 1999, according to the NYS DCCS. The state is also seeing its lowest number of drug offenders since 1986 with just over 7,000 drug offenders incarcerated in the system at the end of 2012, a drastic drop from the 24,000 drug offenders incarcerated in 1996.

The transitional period is meant to allow significant time to appropriately transfer inmates as well as transition employees from one facility to another. In total, the four New York correctional facilities employ nearly 700 staff.

But New York stands as an example of a larger wave of prison closures in the United States that have taken place over recent years as inmate populations take a dramatic fall. As national crime rates fall and states look for alternatives to incarceration, new building in the correctional industry has become somewhat superfluous.

The North Carolina Department of Adult Corrections will see the closure of five prisons that will result in the loss of 685 jobs. In January, the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections announced the closures of both State Correctional Institution (SCI) Cresson and SCI Greensburg. The majority of the 2,400 inmates for the two correctional facilities will be housed in the new SCI Benner. And despite major opposition by the local community, Texas made the decision to close the doors to Mineral Wells Pre-Parole Transfer Facility as well as Dawson State Jail.

The bittersweet closures represent an overall success for taxpayers but also a loss of thousands of jobs, which many fear will have supremely negative effects on small communities, as well as the complications of transferring inmates from

one part of the state to another. Needless to say, with prison closures and inmate consolidation new building in corrections has taken an indeterminate stall.

According to Ed Spooner, AIA, president of New Orleans-based Correctional Planning Consultants, the amount of new construction available in the market has substantially reduced in the past three to four years because of these closures and population drop.

"I would be optimistic in the long run. In the short run, the architecture and engineering community is going to be slow and the construction industry is going to be slow," Spooner said.

In order to understand the full scope of the situation, Spooner said, one must understand the history and cyclical nature of inmate populations. Currently, the combination of court mandates to reduce the prison population as well as tight budgets on both the county and state level have greatly contributed to the sharp decline in inmate numbers, Spooner said. In addition, motions such as pretrial releases and new alternatives to incarceration have further reduced that population.

In some ways, Spooner said, the closure of inefficient prisons has very positive aspects for the corrections industry.

"The reduction in total beds have allowed state's to close obsolete facilities; facilities that are physically obsolete, falling apart in many cases. And these facilities, because of their design based on practices 30 years or 40 years ago, are very inefficient and expensive to operate and require substantially higher staffing levels," Spooner said. "It's been an opportunity to get rid of some facilities that should have been closed."

But Spooner, with his 40 years of experience in the design and planning of justice facilities, said there corrections departments and corrections builders should have the expectation of the inmate population simply flat lining at its current low point.

"What has happened in the last several cycles like this is that crime rates will increase," Spooner said. "We're letting a number of people out on the streets through forced early probation and parole, pretrial releases; and they will reoffend in many cases."

As crime rates go up, there will be public pressure on politicians to increase the rate of incarceration, Spooner said. This will ultimately result in the need for more prison space. Spooner cited the three strikes law as a law motivated by the public to get long-term offenders off the streets. Moreover, funds have not been spent productively at many local levels in terms of public education, Spooner said, which he believes has the most direct impact with the future prison populations.

"I would think in the next five years we'll see a substantial increase in the amount of corrections construction," he said.

But for now, the industry has begun to seek out more renovation and repair work versus new construction.

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